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New brigade could arrive soon

DAVID WICKERT; The News Tribune

Soldiers from Louisiana could begin arriving at Fort Lewis in the next few months as the Army prepares to convert the 2nd Cavalry Regiment to a Stryker brigade.

Much of the unit should begin arriving next spring, Fort Lewis spokesman Lt. Col. Bill Costello said Friday. Eventually, the post will see an influx of about 3,900 soldiers and their families.

"It's a great deal for Fort Lewis any time you get additional soldiers," Costello said.

The Army announced Friday it will move the 2nd Cavalry Regiment from Fort Polk, La., to Fort Lewis as part of a larger shuffling of units nationwide. The unit - just back from Iraq - will be converted to a Stryker brigade.

Strykers are the Army's effort to field rapid-deployment forces with more firepower than traditional infantry forces. The first two Stryker Brigades were formed at Fort Lewis. One has been in Iraq for eight months and is scheduled to return this fall. The other will leave for Iraq in September.

The Army has plans for six Stryker brigades, and discussions are under way for a possible seventh.

Costello said the Army made the decision to move the 2nd Cavalry to Fort Lewis because the post has demonstrated its proficiency at Stryker conversions. It also has the training facilities and space for soldiers.

"And we're supported by a great community," Costello said. "You're not going to put 4,000 soldiers in a community that's hostile to the facility."

Costello said all three Stryker units will not be on post at the same time for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, the base will support three brigade's worth of families. Those families, he said, will be a boon to the local community, seeking jobs and housing.

Costello does not expect new permanent construction at Fort Lewis related to the arrival of the 2nd Cavalry. However, he said the post might need more modular buildings to accommodate some of the brigade's administrative offices.

The move is part of a larger Army reorganization aimed at making its brigades - troop formations of a few thousand soldiers - more independent when sent overseas. Each of the Army's 10 divisions is adding at least one brigade of ground troops under the plan.

In fiscal year 2005 - which begins Oct. 1 - the Army will launch new brigade combat teams at Fort Polk; Fort Richardson, Alaska; and Fort Hood, Texas.

The Army said the moves will be revisited as part of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure process, but Washington congressmen believe it's unlikely Fort Lewis will be closed, given its strategic importance and the plan to relocate more troops there. Costello also noted its proximity to McChord Air Force Base, a sea port and the Yakima Training Center as other reasons not to shutter it.

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